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LINCOLN BIRTHPLACE FARM AT HODGENVILLE, KY.

ADDRESS

DELIVERED ON THE

OCCASION OF THE ACCEPTANCE OF
A DEED OF GIFT TO THE NATION
BY THE LINCOLN FARM ASSOCIATION
OF THE LINCOLN BIRTHPLACE FARM
AT HODGENVILLE, KY.

BY

HON. JOHN SHARP WILLIAMS
UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM MISSISSIPPI

SEPTEMBER 4, 1916



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GIFT OF LINCOLN BIRTHPLACE FARM AT HODGENVILLE, KY.

ADDRESS OF HON. JOHN SHARP WILLIAMS, UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM MISSISSIPPI.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

The presentation and acceptance of this generous gift, which is really made to the Nation and the people of the United States, whose servants we all are—the President being Chief only—is fraught not only with memories but with meanings too many and too various for one man's expression.

Abraham Lincoln was born in yonder little log cabin. He was not the first nor the only one of our great men to be thus humbly born. He sprang from that poorer class of southern white people whence sprang also Patrick Henry, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and so many others whose names illustrate on the pages of our history the fact that those of humblest origin in a free democracy of equal opportunities can and often do reach the very highest station.

Lincoln was not "the first American," as has been said of him. There were preceding him, even in the presidential chair, others who were not colonials of any European people, but thoroughly and altogether American—typical Americans, each in his own way.

He was more than "the first American," however. He was one of the greatest Americans. The tide of time, which has buried animosities and prejudices, has left every reflecting and just mind free, and yet compelled, to draw that conclusion. He was great, not in the way that Alexander of Macedon or Napoleon of Corsica was, but in a better way. His was not the greatness of genius, nearly always selfish. His was the greatness of common sense and tenderness. It consisted fundamentally in intellectual and moral humility and in intellectual and moral integrity, which salient characteristics enabled him to furnish to the world a spectacle scarcely if ever excelled of self-subordination to the interests, the welfare, the unity of the Republic; and, more characteristically perhaps yet, of self-surrender to an enlightened public opinion, the growth of which he shared and studied, the tendency of which he cautiously and wisely guided, and the consummation of which into deed he at the right moment effected. He never went so fast that the common sense and the common conscience of the common people could not keep measurably apace, nor did he ever go so slowly that these left him stranded on the shore while they passed beyond him under other and quicker and abler navigators. In other words, he was like all the great human instrumentalities of Providence—a part and parcel of the growing form and texture of the time, unconsciously following and consciously directing American public sentiment, as this came

naturally or was forced by inevitable circumstances into existence. This enlightened public opinion, for which he had "a decent respect," constituted then, as always, the only real controlling force and sovereign power in a country whose people are free and self-governing.

Horace Greeley once accused him of being an opportunist. So are and must be all real statesmen in free countries. They weigh opportunity and measure its strength; but they also help to create it and then seize *the opportunity* to effect the desired result. This is sagacity as contradistinguished from "smartness." They are opportunists, but they are more.

Lincoln was in this and some other respects singularly like that other great American, Thomas Jefferson. Both of them were idealists in the closet and statesmen in office. There was no limit to the visions which either had of what Jefferson called "the indefinite perfectibility of human nature," nor to their confidence in the progress and enlightenment of man under rightly constituted popular government, founded on an enlightened and educated public opinion. Both were democrats and both believed in the aristocracy of intelligence as the only aristocracy recognizable by freemen. Many dreams which either had have come true. Many more are yet in the womb of fate, certain later to come forth. Yet neither in office ever attempted to force upon the country any result for which a considerable and probably prevailing public opinion was not ready. They attempted to pluck, when in charge of the orchard, no fruit until the fruit was either ripe or ripening, and above all their purpose was not to kill or even harm the tree. Hence both are accused by men of little minds of "inconsistency." It is to be noted, however, that neither ever really "deserted a principle or a friend," as Jefferson's daughter proudly said of her father.

No two men who have figured conspicuously in molding the destinies of the English-speaking race ever equaled these two in their abiding, patient, and loving reliance upon the rectitude of the purposes of the people and in unwavering faith in the wisdom of their ultimate decision. Lincoln never tired of professing himself a disciple of Jefferson. He went so far at one time as to say that the vital spirit—that is, the birth principle—of American institutions was to be found in the Declaration of Independence and not in the Constitution of the United States. On no fundamentally great question did they ever materially differ, not even about slavery, not even about the relations which should exist between the two races in the event of negro emancipation. Between the two the chief difference was one of personal temperament; Lincoln, of the two, lived very much more within himself. He was, spiritually speaking, a lonesome man, sadly so, but throwing about himself a veil of anecdote and humor—sometimes rough humor—which served as a shield to ward off intrusion. Hidden behind this veil was not only serious but pathetic and nearly always solitary thought. Hence that indescribable mixture of humor and pathos which we find in him, as in Shakespeare and Cervantes.

Mr. Jefferson, on the contrary, was frequently witty, but had no sense of humor at all, and seemed to take a sort of delight in letting all the world see every process of his thought, as though through a window glass.

It is trite now to say that every man in this world is the product of two things—his heredity and his environment. Unlike plants and irrational creatures, however, man is not altogether the product of either or of both. While his environment makes him, he helps to make his environment—can even somewhat change it by conscious purpose. Moreover, while he can not repress, nor reverse, he may influence the tendencies of his heredity even.

Lincoln's family we all know about. There was very little stimulating in its influence. It furnished rather a platform to rise from than a standard to live up to.

Likewise his early environment was, to say the least, discouraging; there was little in it to evoke ambition, or to encourage, "hoping through hope to reach the stars."

But he rose from the platform; he reached the stars.

Within almost modern big-gun shot distance from where we now stand Jefferson Davis was born.

Both of these men were "border State" men, Kentuckians; both of them came from pioneer ancestry who had fought for American freedom and had braved the dangers and endured the isolation of the wilderness. It is a curious reflection, though there be not time to indulge in it here and now, as to how far each of these men's future—his political philosophy, the sectional patriotism of each, his leaning to nationality on the one side or to State rights on the other—might have been altered, mayhap reversed, had Jefferson Davis's family moved him into Indiana and then into Illinois, and had Abraham Lincoln's family moved him first into Louisiana and then into Mississippi. However interesting that inquiry may be, the reverse occurred. Davis became a very extreme southerner; Lincoln never became a very extreme northerner. The men were very much unlike, and yet both were alike in possessing the cardinal human virtues—truthfulness, moral and intellectual honesty, courage, loyalty to ideals. There was, too, somewhat of inflexibility about both, though in one case the inflexibility, while knightly, was stern, logical, unyielding, unhumorous, and even proud; while in the other case it was modified by humility and a rich sense of humor, from which flowed that wonderful capacity for "making allowances," that broad knowledge of an opposite's way of looking at things, that sympathetic appreciation of the moods and ways of thinking and the ways of feeling of the untaught and unenriched masses of mankind.

With Davis there were no laughter-inciting "sidelights on himself and others and their relations to one another" to relieve even temporarily the tension of a fixed and absorbing purpose. Lincoln was never without them. By being never without them he made lesser men, like Stanton, for example, "very impatient."

Davis became the very type of the best plantation life of the extreme South. As a part and parcel of that life he consecrated himself to his section, whose very civilization and social order he thought to be menaced. Lincoln consecrated himself to the Nation. Both endured nobly to the very end, each steadfastly "keeping the faith."

Lincoln remained all his life a borderer. In his temperament he came very much nearer that of the southerner than that of the New Englander, or the New Yorker, or Pennsylvanian. No theory of any sort would ever have led him into that gross violation of common

sense and common justice which after the war brought about the grotesque though cruel saturnalia of the southern reconstruction governments; nor could any theory, or any war experience, however bitter, have brought him to a hatred for the southern white people, even of the slave-holding class. He lived with none; he died without any.

He was a great nationalist, not only in political vision but in this, that he knew and loved the people of both sections. He was perhaps the most thoroughly nationalistic and the least sectionalistic of all our Presidents, not even excepting George Washington, who never forgot that he was "a Virginian and a Gentleman." Hence it is peculiarly appropriate that the legal title to Mr. Lincoln's birthplace should rest in the Nation itself.

It may be sadly recorded that while he understood the men of both sections, it is doubtful if any very large percentage of those of either ever understood him until long after he was dead. Jefferson Davis understood him partially; understood fully his utter lack of malice. Witness the superb reply of the chief of the fallen Confederacy when, his attention having been called to President Johnson's proclamation containing the insinuation that he (Davis) had been complicité to the assassination of Mr. Lincoln, he replied: "There is one man in the United States, at any rate, who knows that to be a falsehood. That is the man who wrote it. He knows that I would infinitely rather have Lincoln than to have him in the White House." Davis afterwards said: "Next to the loss of the cause itself, the death of Mr. Lincoln was the greatest calamity that ever befell the South."

Shakespeare, whose writings Mr. Lincoln read and loved so much, helped to mold his thought. The broad and sympathetic charity with which he viewed and sometimes laughed at all men and women—the wise and the foolish, the just and the unjust, the learned and the ignorant, the sinners whom Christ came to save and the righteous who "needed not a physician"—was almost Shakespearean, leaving anger against those who might or might not deserve it to God who knew, repeating sincerely, as he did in one of his inaugural addresses, "But let us not judge lest we be judged." I think he absorbed from Shakespeare the characteristic breadth in expressing thought which led to this, that so many utterances of his are not confined in their applicability to the time or the place where they were made, but expand in appositeness to many places and many times. Even when arguing a concrete institution like slavery his language was universal rather than particular. His English was terse, forcible, Saxon. His Gettysburg speech is the most eloquent illustration of these qualities—verily *multum in parvo*. It is by all odds the greatest short speech in the English, or, for aught I know, in any language. To illustrate the breadth of applicability of that wonderful dedication speech, one might paraphrase it, with slight omission and no material addition, so as to make Mr. Lincoln himself, who was a great orator—because he was a man of eloquent thought—dedicate to the Nation that he loved so well the home in which he was born so humbly.

Would there, for example, be anything inapposite for the purposes of this occasion in the use of these words: "Seven score years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created

equal. Now we are engaged in * * * testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. * * * We have come to dedicate to the Nation the birthplace of him who gave his life that that nation might live."

"But in a larger sense we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow, this ground." The brave and patient man who was born here, by his life and death, "has consecrated it far above our poor power to add or to detract." "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget * * * what he did." "It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us * * * that from the memory of" this "honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which" he "gave the last measure of devotion; and that we here highly resolve that" he "shall not have lived nor died in vain; that this Nation under God shall have" daily "a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

Suppose that in analyzing the character and results to the two sections of the late War between the States I, the son of a Confederate soldier, who died in the cause, were to use this language, which is to be found in Mr. Lincoln's second inaugural address, would it not be a fitting comment even for this day and place? "Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and prayed to the same God, and each invoked His aid against the other. * * * The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty had his own purposes."

Again, what a fine exhortation to renewed love between the reunited sections of these once disunited States would not this language be even now: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives" each "to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in" (and having already "bound up the Nation's wounds") "do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

My fellow citizens! We call one another fellow citizens now from Maine to Florida and even "where Oregon rolls." We are fellow citizens now and this "indissoluble Union of indestructible States" which all of us to-day so intensely love has been reestablished only because, as Lincoln said, "God had purposes of His own." "The stars in their course fought against" the South as they fought of old "against Sisera."

Yet again, pursuing my illustration, all realize the present applicability, with slight verbal alterations, of what Mr. Lincoln said in his first inaugural address:

"Physically speaking, we can not separate. We can not remove our separate sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other; *but the different parts of our country can not do this.*

* * * * *

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every

battle field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land," once more "swell the chorus of the Union," as they forever shall "when * * * touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

"The mystic chords of memory!" What a world of potency there is in a phrase. These "mystic chords of memory" are the richest heritage and possession of any great people. The music which is made upon them is sad; but it is embracing; it "holds the heart up higher." It is music *in memoriam* of "the generous and patriotic spirits" of a country; of "its buried warlike and its wise." It is always well then, by monument and memorial, to keep all worthy memories fresh in the minds of the people, thus inducing each generation to rethink, refeel, and relive that which was noblest and worthiest in the generations preceding it. Thus we shall have the Nation make of its foregone generations "stepping stones of its dead self" wherefrom to rise "to higher things."







